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ABSTRACT

Three case studies investigated the school day of disadvantaged rural students with severe disabilities. Subjects were severely disabled girls, living in families with no income other than public assistance, and attending elementary or middle school in three poor rural school districts. A constant comparative method of single and cross-site data analysis revealed similar daily patterns of little or no instruction. Common barriers to special education policy implementation in a rural disadvantaged context included shortages of expert personnel, the weak influence of poor families on behalf of their children, and the lack of positive examples of service delivery and consequent lower student expectations by staff. The results highlight the discrepancy between policy intent and practice with persons who have, in general, been excluded from the research and literature. Improving services for these students is a complex issue. States should identify not only their rural districts, but also the socioeconomic status of these districts as a first step in identifying students at greater risk of educational failure. Both poor school districts and poor families may require advocates to meet their needs. Finally, federal and state aid should target collaborative efforts among universities and state and local education agencies to provide access to expert personnel and examples of positive service strategies. This report contains 20 references. (SV)

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Students with Low Incidence Disabilities

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Students with Low Incidence Disabilities in
Disadvantaged, Rural Settings:

A Qualitative Perspective

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Abstract

This exploratory, descriptive study investigated the impact of special education policy on the school day of three, disadvantaged, rural students with severe disabilities. Qualitative research methodology guided the inquiry. A constant comparative method of single and cross-site data analysis revealed that the product of policy was a day with little or no instruction, and limited opportunities for peer interaction. Barriers to policy implementation in a rural, disadvantaged context included shortage of personnel, weak political influence of poor families, and lack of positive service examples. Implications for policy, practice, and future research were highlighted.

Students with Low Incidence Disabilities in
Disadvantaged Rural Settings: A Qualitative Perspective

The current educational agenda has voiced concern for increasing proportions of minority groups, increasing numbers of children below the poverty line, and fewer students being raised in two-parent families (Hodgkinson, 1988; Reeves, 1988). In addition, according to The Ninth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Education of the Handicapped Act, the goals of P.L. 94-142 have, in general, been realized, but the student with severe disabilities was found to be most in need of improved services, and rural special education was cited as one of seven areas in need of specific improvements (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 1987). No recent studies have recognized the concern for students who, in addition to being members of social and familial situations which place them at risk for educational failure, have intensive learning needs which are exacerbated by the school and community context of their education.

Low incidence disabilities in rural areas include those students with multiple or severe disabilities,

sensory impairments, and/or challenging behaviors. Descriptions of exemplary rural programs have provided examples of how rural special educators are attempting to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities (Condon, 1983; Helge, 1984, 1986; McKenzie, Hill, Sousie, York, & Baker, 1977; Singer, 1984; The Homecoming Project, 1988). Also to receive federal special education funding, rural school districts are responsible for documenting their compliance with P.L. 94-142 provisions for serving students with severe learning needs (OSERS, 1987). However, these descriptions and compliance reports are from a programmatic perspective and do not document the content of the day for students. These reports also assume the economic base of various rural communities are comparable, and they do not address the variable of socioeconomic class within these rural districts. Policy makers and practitioners should know what constitutes the current educational reality for these students whose risk for educational failure is at a minimum, doubled, by having a severe learning need, and living in a family and/or social situation which have historically challenged schools. Only then can

appropriate services for rural, disadvantaged students with low incidence disabilities be determined.

PURPOSE

This exploratory, descriptive study focused on the content of the school day of disadvantaged, rural students with severe disabilities, and addressed how the context surrounding the day may have shaped the child's school experience. Questions which guided the study included the following:

1. What does the rural, disadvantaged student with severe disabilities do in her school day? How does the content of the day compare among rural areas given that federal and state policy implementation was required to be universal?
2. How may have the historical process of implementing special education policy for the student, shaped the content of the student's day?
3. What issues were apparent in the rural school and community environments which may have influenced the student's day?

METHOD

Participants

Three students with severe disabilities were selected

from three rural school districts in the United States, based on principles of multi-site policy research (Firestone & Herriott, 1984), and on Spradley's (1980) criteria for selecting a social situation to conduct participant-observation, including accessibility and permissibility. The rural school districts met Helge's (1984) definition of rural and had characteristics indicative of poverty. All three students lived in families who had no sources of income other than public assistance (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures and Instrumentation

Qualitative research methodology (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973) guided the inquiry. Participant-observation (Edgerton, 1984) and informal interviews (Spradley, 1979) were the primary methods of measurement. The Student Observation Instrument recorded the following domains: (a) The activity; (b) the time an activity began and ended; (c) instructional materials; (d) observation notes, including, skill area, objective of the activity, person responsible for the

teaching, adult/child ratio and groupings, developmental and chronological age ranges of the groups; (e) theoretical notes; (f) methodological notes; (g) ideas; and (h) analytic memos. Continuous recording occurred throughout the entire school day, from the time the students boarded the bus, to the point of their departure after school. Student records were copied and debriefing interviews were informally held with participants prior to leaving the observation day.

Corroborative information (Stainback & Stainback, 1981) from the school and community was obtained through observation, demographic data questionnaires, document analysis, and interviewing the special education coordinator, the special education teacher, the principal, the parents, and a community informant, during pre-and post-observation days. Documents included a) community newspapers, b) district special education handbook, c) school handbook for both faculty and students, d) teacher schedules, and e) student due process records. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of single and cross-site qualitative data analysis (Barton & Lazarsfeld, 1967) was utilized.

Validity and Reliability. Three ways of increasing the validity of the findings were multiple sources of evidence, chain of evidence, and investigator triangulation (Stainback & Stainback, 1981; Yin, 1984). Methods for assuring reliability included documenting the specific procedures in conducting the case (Lagrow & Prochnow-Lagrow, 1983; Yin, 1984), creating a case study data base (Yin, 1984), and recording both objective notes and subjective ideas (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). Previous to this research, the investigator was a special education professional for five years, in a rural, disadvantaged school district located in close proximity to the selected school districts. Thus, although the researcher was unaquainted with the specific students in the selected districts, the researcher was familiar with the sociocultural context of the investigation which increased observer reliability (Repp, Nieminen, Olinger, & Brusca, 1988).

RESULTS

The Product of Policy

Insert Figure 1 about here

Day Activities. As seen in Figure 1, instructional activities were not the focus of the school day. Elizabeth had no instruction, while Tiffany spent less than 37% of her day, (less than 90 minutes) on instruction, and Roseann had less than 25%, (a little over two hours), of instructional time. A large amount of the non-instructional time was spent on meals and sitting idly. Elizabeth napped most of the day or paced around the corner of the room in which she was confined, while Tiffany played alone.

Time with Peers. As seen in Figure 2, although the students were placed in classrooms with other students

Insert Figure 2 about here

with disabilities, they spent the majority of their day alone. Elizabeth was physically separated from her peers, assigned to a corner of a room which was blocked by low bookshelves and cabinets. Elizabeth and Tiffany had no learning activities with peers, but were with them primarily at recess and meals. Although Roseann spent nearly 28% of her day with classmates in group learning activities, no interaction took place.

Policy Implementation in a Disadvantaged, Rural Context

Several patterns emerged in the study which shaped the school day and exacerbated efforts to serve poor, rural students with severe disabilities. These patterns included a shortage of expert personnel, the weak influence poor families had on behalf of their children with disabilities, and the lack of positive examples of service delivery which decreased student expectations.

Shortage of expert personnel. The lack of certified personnel was cited by one administrator as "the worst problem" plaguing less affluent, rural districts in meeting the demands of the mandate. Recruitment of teachers certified to work with students with moderate to severe disabilities affected the days for the students in three unique yet related ways. For Elizabeth, her teacher was emergency certified and had no courses in teaching students with moderate to severe handicaps. She freely admitted: "I don't know what to do with [Elizabeth]. I have to teach the others. I've got parents on my back."

For Tiffany, her district did not have teachers for students labeled severely/profoundly handicapped (S/PH) at the high school level. The district also employed

only one teacher for the S/PH at the elementary level, who was placed in a school at the far end of the county away from Tiffany's home. Thus, Tiffany was placed in a middle school-level program and would remain there until the end of her eligibility for special services. Tiffany's mother was concerned about Tiffany's progress, but could not hope for a different teacher the next year.

Roseann had only been in school 2 years. However, thus far, she had had a new teacher each year. In her first year of school, her teacher was not certified. Her second year, she had a certified teacher, but that teacher was unsure how long she wanted to teach in that geographic area. Roseann's mother noted that the teacher made a great difference in Roseann's progress saying, ". . . last year, it seemed like her teacher wasn't that interested in the kids. . . it seems like she was going backwards." Thus, teacher turnover could play havoc with the consistency needed for Roseann to make progress.

Lack of qualified teachers in rural, less affluent school districts limited services for these students with severe disabilities. The lack of power poor

families had to influence policy outcomes was a second barrier in implementing P.L. 94-142.

Weak Political Power of Poor Families. Weatherley's (1979) study of a state special education reform process in three urban school districts found that disparities among school districts in meeting the needs of students with special needs were directly related to the wealth of the states and school districts. Additional points he emphasized relative to socioeconomic class and policy included (a) parent and advocacy groups were concentrated in urban settings and are comprised predominantly of middle-class professional families; and (b) due process and appeal procedures were used most often by affluent families, and school personnel followed the procedures more closely if the parent was more wealthy.

Elizabeth's family had the temporary support of an attorney to get her enrolled in school, and Tiffany's mother threatened to call a child advocate if the school would not provide a full day of instruction for Tiffany. However, even though the parents expressed concern about their child's program, these families did not challenge the implementation of P.L. 94-142, and the resulting

school day for their children. Other, more affluent families in the district did obtain the services of a child advocate, however, the advocate benefitted only the child who was directly represented and negatively affected the days of the students in the study.

For example, for Elizabeth, the absence of the advocate's support meant she did not receive speech therapy, but other students with less severe speech problems in her classroom, who had advocate support, received speech services. In Tiffany's district, a student with very similar learning needs, who attended another school in the district and had legal representation, received one-to-one training her entire school day with an appropriately certified teacher, and, in addition, received a complete summer program. For Roseann, it meant she did not receive speech because "no therapist is available" as was stated on her IEP. Yet, in Roseann's classroom, two students with advocates received speech therapy. Interviews revealed the district employed three full-time therapists and contracted with five additional therapists for speech services.

The lack of qualified personnel and the weak

political influence of poor families impeded the implementation of P.L. 94-142 in this poverty setting. Also, the rural isolation of the districts prevented them from being exposed to proactive examples of service delivery, a third barrier to policy implementation.

Lack of Positive Examples. Urban and more affluent rural districts may provide a more comprehensive array of services for students with low incidence disabilities, not because they have more resources, but because of their ability to interact with other social service agencies and in many cases urban-based university programs which provide positive examples of serving this population. These positive service examples subsequently can lead to the development of higher expectations for the potential of these students, and the urban districts can then develop services and programs to meet these expectations.

These districts were located over 3 hours from a university training program and urban services and they were financially less able to provide inservice opportunities. All the student records in the study indicated they had been labeled as essentially unable to learn, which lowered teacher expectations. For example

even though Tiffany's classroom was designated for students labeled TMH or S/PH, her teacher perceived them as having severe handicaps, and thus, not likely to be trained. He had recently received his first in-service experience, sponsored by a university program, and noted:

. . . I thought my kids were severely handicapped until I went to this <inservice> training. . . They're not. . . They are trainable. . . like Tiffany is ambulatory. . . she actually has a lot of communication. . . like those kids I see at this training. . . many only have eye gaze as the only way to communicate their needs. . . this training has opened up a whole new world for me. .

Implications

In these school districts, the rural, disadvantaged student with severe disabilities experiences a school day alone and with few opportunities to learn. Implementing special education policy in a disadvantaged, rural context, is hampered especially by the lack of expert input into services, the low level of influence poor families have on policy implementation, and the few positive examples and low expectations which

exist for encouraging student potential. Consequently, improving services for these students is a complex issue, which cannot be wholly addressed from monocular perspectives of curriculum, management, or policy.

The variable of poverty in rural education literature and research needs to be delineated. While rural education has received much greater attention in the last decade (DeYoung, 1987), and rural settings have been acknowledged as diverse, policy, research, and practice do not identify differences in socioeconomic class (i.e., class differences between western ranches and Appalachian hollows). States should identify not only their rural regions, but should also determine the socioeconomic status of these districts. Rural school districts should then identify families and "pockets of poverty" within their settings which would place students at a greater risk of educational failure.

When rural poverty is recognized, school districts in less affluent areas should receive the services of a "systems" advocate to provide leverage and support for their needs at the state and federal levels. Poor families should also be assigned an advocate, external to the district, to ensure due process. Finally, state

and federal education monies should be targeted towards collaborate efforts among universities and the state and local education agencies to provide both access to expert personnel and examples of positive service strategies which can increase expectations for student potential.

Future research should address policy for students with low incidence disabilities in other low income settings. It is critically important, that on the eve of the implementation of P.L. 99-457, that will provide incentives for states and school districts to serve children with disabilities, ages 3 to 5, policy makers and practitioners be sensitive to issues which promote and hinder a meaningful educational experience for poor children with low incidence disabilities. Educational research which extends the research focus from the policy implementor to the target of policy, and considers the cultural context of the policy, would greatly aid the understanding of the daily educational realities for persons with low incidence disabilities in disadvantaged settings. This understanding could lead to the development of educational policy and practice which is appropriate for all students, regardless of

their socioeconomic class, disability, ethnicity, or geographic living location.

Limitations of the Study. The three students selected for this study cannot be considered representative of all poor, rural students with severe disabilities, nor the selected school districts considered representative of all rural districts within disadvantaged communities. The study also does not pretend to be an in-depth ethnography, typically the result of years of study. The training and experience of the researcher in this setting was critical for obtaining reliable data over a shorter time period. However, from its inception, P.L. 94-142 was designed to meet the needs of all students with disabilities, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status. This research highlights the discrepancy between policy intent and practice with persons who have in general, been excluded from the research and literature, and the findings should stimulate further study and discussion in this area.

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Students with Low Incidence Disabilities

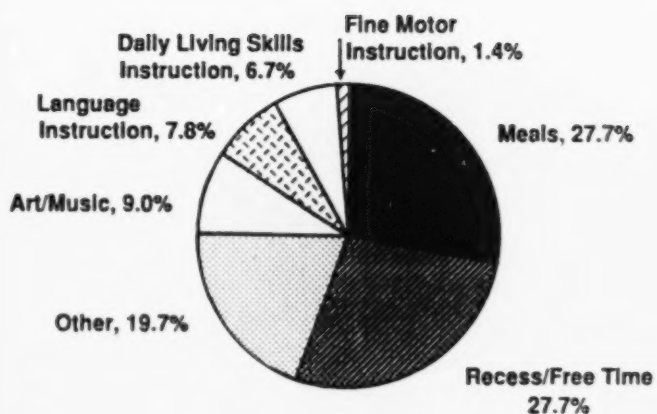
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Table 1

Selected Site and Student Characteristics

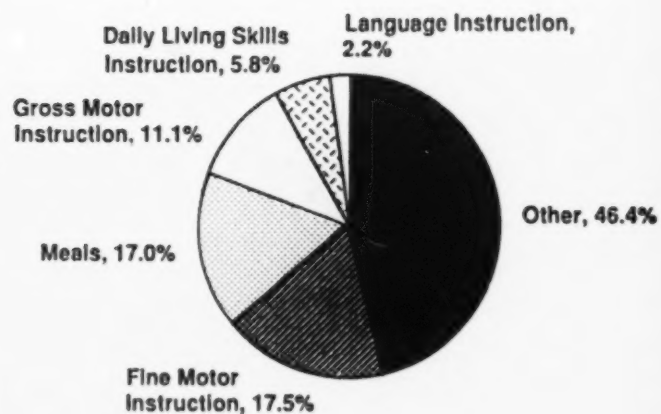
Characteristics	National Figure	Site 1 (Elizabeth)	Site 2 (Tiffany)	Site 3 (Roseann)
Population sparsity (persons per square mile)	--	53.9	67.7	103.7
Families below the poverty line (%)	12.5	30.9	27.0	19.4
Unemployment rate (%)	5.4	10.4	8.4	10.8
Students qualified for hot lunch program (%)	--	97.0	48.3	76.7
Label		S/PH	S/PH	TMI
Placement		Self- Contained	Self- Contained	Self- Contained
Age (yrs)		11	7	6
Verbal?		No	No	No
Ambulatory?		Yes	Yes	Yes
Toilet Trained?		No	No	Yes

Note. Table source is not cited to protect the anonymity of participants.



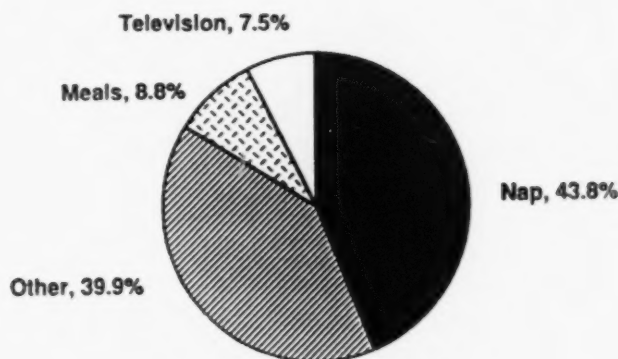
Roseann

Total Instruction, 24.9%



Tiffany

Total Instruction, 36.6%



Elizabeth

Total Instruction, 0.0%

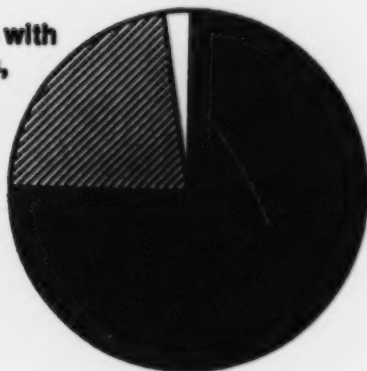
Figure Captions

Figure 1. School day activities of the students.

Elizabeth

With Typical Peers,
2.6%

With Peers with
Disabilities,
22.1%

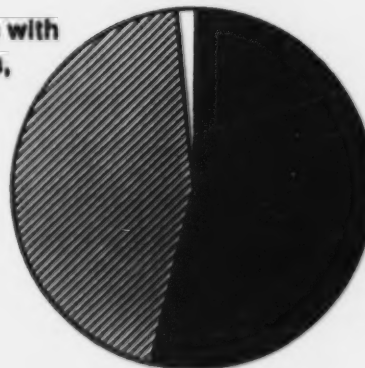


Alone, 75.3%

Tiffany

With Typical Peers,
1.7%

With Peers with
Disabilities,
44.6%

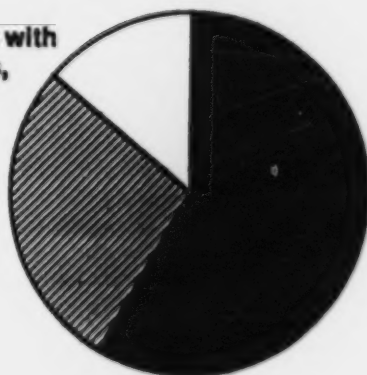


Alone, 53.7%

Roseann

With Typical Peers,
14.0%

With Peers with
Disabilities,
27.7%



Alone, 58.3%

Figure Captions

Figure 2. Percentage of school day with peers.